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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001670

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: TIGERS TELL NORWAY A MAJOR GSL
OFFENSIVE COULD DERAIL PEACE TALKS

REF: A) COLOMBO 1627 B) COLOMBO 1620 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. James R. Moore, for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Norwegian Ambassador Hans Brattskar briefed Charge October 11 on his October 10 meeting with Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) political wing leader S.P. Tamilselvan in Kilinochchi. Tamilselvan confirmed the LTTE would attend talks with the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) in Geneva on October 28-29 -- with the caveat that the Tigers reserve the right to pull out of talks if GSL security forces launch a major offensive on Tiger positions. The LTTE also demanded that the GSL allow the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) access to the Forward Defense Line (FDL) on the Jaffna Peninsula. Military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe confirmed that security forces exchanged "defensive" artillery fire with Tiger cadres on the morning of October 11 at the FDL. However, pro-LTTE media declared that a major GSL offensive had begun. Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa told Charge October 11 that the day's skirmishes were provoked by LTTE offensive actions. End Summary.

Tough Tigers

¶2. (C) Norwegian Ambassador Hans Brattskar met with LTTE political wing leader S.P. Tamilselvan on October 10 in Kilinochchi to confirm the Tigers' participation in peace talks with the GSL on October 28-29 in Geneva. In an October 11 read out to Charge, Brattskar described the meeting as "difficult and tough." The LTTE agreed to the date and venue of the talks, he reported, but reserved the right to reverse its decision if the GSL were to launch a "military offensive or land grab."

¶3. (C) Tamilselvan said GSL military action against the LTTE in Tiger-controlled Varakai (Batticaloa district) over the weekend had "disturbed" the Tigers, who claimed that the government also has "offensive designs" on the north. Brattskar said Tamilselvan several times "came close to saying" that the security forces' firing artillery and mortars on LTTE positions in Varakai on October 8-9 was reason enough not to go to talks.

14. (C) Tamilselvan insisted that the LTTE respected the September 12 Co-chairs' statement calling for a cessation of hostilities and wanted to give talks a chance despite their mistrust of the government. He told Brattskar that the GSL must allow the SLMM access to the FDL in Muhamalai, Jaffna so that the Nordic monitors "can see that the GSL is engaging in offensive, not defensive" operations. The Tiger leader argued that the GSL was not granting the SLMM access to the FDL because "it does not want the world to see what is going on."

Fighting Flares Along the Forward Defense Line

15. (C) Brattskar also told Charge that on the morning of October 11, the LTTE called him to say "a major offensive had started" on the Jaffna Peninsula. The pro-LTTE Tamilnet website likewise declared that the GSL had "begun an offensive in Jaffna," launching ground troops into LTTE-controlled territory. However, military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe told Emboff that on October 11 troops responded to "continuous LTTE artillery and mortar fire along the FDL" and attempted infiltrations by LTTE cadres (septel DAO report forthcoming). By noon on October 11 the LTTE informed the SLMM that fighting at the FDL had stopped.

GSL Peace Secretary Responds

16. (C) In separate meetings on October 11, Brattskar briefed
COLOMBO 00001670 002 OF 002

GSL Secretariat for Coordination of the Peace Process (SCOPP) chief Palitha Kohona and GSL chief negotiator (and Health Minister) Nimal Siripala de Silva on his meeting with the LTTE. Kohona argued that the GSL had not allowed the SLMM to access the FDL because of "genuine security concerns." Brattskar noted that Kohona was unaware that fighting was ongoing in Jaffna that morning.

Defense Secretary: No Push to Elephant Pass

17. (C) In a meeting with Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa on October 11, Charge emphasized that while the U.S. supports the GSL's right to self-defense against LTTE violence, significant offensive actions could keep the LTTE away from peace talks and could, as we have earlier cautioned, also jeopardize the U.S. Marine Expeditionary Unit exercise planned to start in Sri Lanka October 22. Rajapaksa maintained that the LTTE is attacking SLA positions at the FDL, noting that the LTTE killed six soldiers in their bunker with artillery fire October 9 and killed two soldiers October 10. He complained about Tamilnet's "propaganda" (while joking that he logged on to their website first thing every morning) and said the LTTE mounts artillery and mortar attacks across the FDL every day. When asked to confirm reports that the SLA had pushed the FDL south five kilometers in the latest fighting, Rajapaksa laughed and said "we wish, but no," adding that they are trying to enlarge the buffer zone separating the two sides from 500 to 1000 meters. Rajapaksa categorically denied speculation that the SLA intends to push south to Elephant Pass.

Comment

18. (C) There is nothing new in this "when they stop, we'll stop" approach by the GSL and LTTE. If the Tigers are looking for a convenient excuse to call off the next round of talks, GSL "defensive" action at the FDL - which does not appear to us to be a territorial push forward - may provide them that "out." We will continue to advocate maximum restraint when the GSL responds to Tiger provocations, and

urge our partners to do the same.
MOORE